

Martinez In Thick Of Competition For Nickelback Spot



Now in his fourth year at Ohio State, safety Cam Martinez has been through some ups and downs in his collegiate career. Particularly last season.

Getting his first two NCAA starts against Akron and Rutgers in 2021, he rotated in for nickel safety Tanner McCalister at times in 2022 to mixed results. He had a rough game in the team's loss to Michigan, and behind the scenes dealt with several injuries.

"Week three, I had a sprained ankle, and it was kind of lingering for a few weeks, and I reaggravated it again towards the end of the season, too," Martinez said. "Never really felt 100 percent when I played, never felt the best. And I think that was something that had caught up to me towards the end as well. This (offseason) was big for me just to be healthy and not be able to sit out, not sit out any practices or anything like that."

Now that he is healthy, he'll factor into the competition to replace McCalister at nickel. With more consistency, there's a feeling he could bring a lot to the team's defense in 2023.

"He's got great feet. Cam has excellent feet," defensive coordinator Jim Knowles said. "Reminds me of a guy I had at Duke, Michael Carter, who's in the NFL. Doesn't have to be big, with Cam it's just all about confidence. It's establishing that confidence."

Competition will be stiff for Martinez to win a starting job or rotational duty at the nickelback position.

Ohio State landed former Syracuse safety Ja'Had Carter out of the transfer portal, a three-year starter with the Orange who has 136 tackles, five interceptions and seven pass breakups to his credit already in his collegiate career.

"He's got his head down and he's working," safeties coach Perry Eliano said of Carter. "He came here because he wanted to be developed and be the very best. He understands the task that's ahead of him."

Then some of the team's cornerbacks are getting a look as Ohio State evaluates how a coverage specialist could fit at the spot. Sophomore Jyaire Brown and redshirt freshman Ryan Turner have been

among the main cornerbacks repping at nickel.

“We look at what that guy has to do in terms of how it fits to our opponents and everything that that position has to do, and we think a corner can do it,” Knowles said. “It’s not a place where you have to be a hard, tough run defender and we can involve our corners there more, and we think that will give us more depth as the season goes on.”

Now that he’s healthy and fighting for a spot, Martinez is looking to limit the number of down reps he has in practice. Despite Carter’s presence and that of a talent-laden safeties room, Martinez has been the starting nickel in both of the team’s scrimmages, which were open to the media.

“The main thing for me is consistency,” Martinez said. “And just knowing that the confidence I have for myself too, I feel like I’ve been building that. I built that last year, building that again with a second year under my belt with the defense and everything like that too. Tanner was a really good mentor for me as well.”

He feels that the competition will bring out the best in all of OSU’s safeties.

“I think when you have a lot of competition like that, especially just in an individual room, I feel that makes you better as a player and as a person as well,” Martinez said. “I think we all have a fire, a spark under us, especially with last year.”